Old-Time Sealing Skipper Tells Grim Tale

'SEAWOLF' McLEAN TWEAK

THERE ARE ONLY a handful of old-time sealers left in Victoria, and fewer still who remember the Seawolf.

His real name was Alex McLean and to find out how he got his nickname you have to slip back 70 or 80 years in the city's history. Which is easy to do if you're chatting with ex-sealer George W. Cessford, who, with his good wife, Nellie, has come to anchor at 43 Kiwanis Village.

They'll have been married 51 years next month.

George is 87, and when I dropped in on him the other afternoon I found he not only had a good memory, but a chuckle in his voice and a twinkle in his eyes—eyes that have often peered into the gloom of a windswept night on the Alaskan coast. They match a pair of capable hands that have done their share of pulling and hauling.

Retired seafarer Cessford told me he left his native New Brunswick when he was three, to travel with his parents by Southern Pacific to San Francisco, then up the coast to Victoria in the old Pacific. Later she was lost off Flattery in a collision.

Young Cessford got his early schooling out near Belmont Farm, close to Esquimalt Lagoon, and started his sealing career in '89 when he shipped out as an $8 a month cabin boy with Capt. Buckman in the schooner Ariel.

Next year he was boat steerer on the Viva with Capt. Baker, and a year later did his first stint as a hunter with Capt. Charlie Harris, who, hale and hearty, lives on Lansdowne Road.

Next trip for sealer Cessford was in the Agnes McDonald; then in '94 he spent a season with Capt. Bill Hughes in the Mary Ellen, a pioneer schooner that Seawolf McLean once skippered. The trip with Capt. Hughes was marked by a fall in the price of skins; and the next year Cessford and a few others chartered the Mermaid, employing Capt. Whiteley at $50 a month as skipper.

"Whiteley must have brought us luck," George reminisced, "because we brought back 1,850 skins, and paid off a $3,500 encumbrance on the boat. Next year we were high boat on the Jap coast."

It sounds simple, but there were gales, to vary the monotony of snow, rain and fog, and always the proximity of an unfriendly rockbound coast. Among the dangers were two-legged ones in the shape of Russian coastguards posted to see that Canadian sealers stayed 30 miles off the Siberian coast.

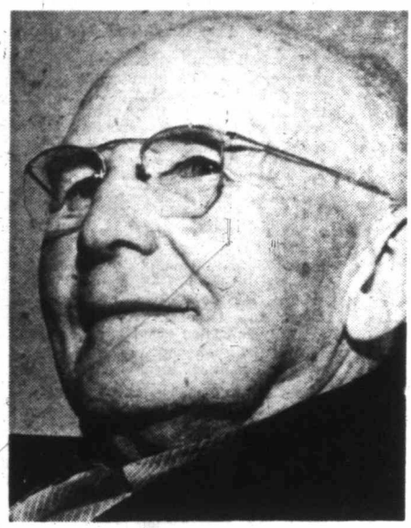
Copper Island in Russian territory was a favorite haunt of these venturesome Victorians.

On the Alaskan shore there could be trouble from U.S. cutters, who saw to it that sealers stayed 60 miles off shore. St. Paul's Rocks and the Pribiloffs were often the secret objectives of the sealers. The complicated international rules called for on and off seasons with local variations which sealers swore were made up on the spot by Americans.

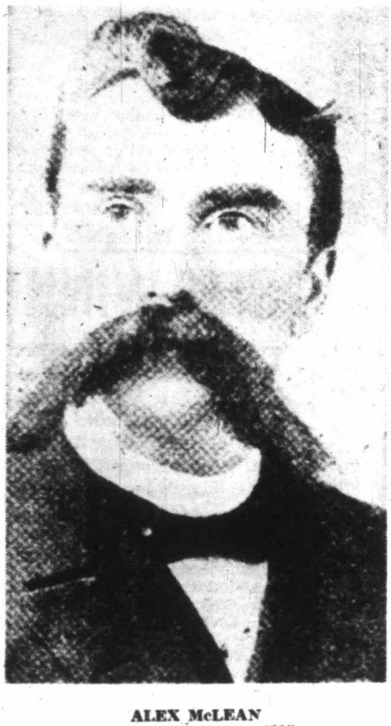
"Everybody took a chance now and again," was the way George Cessford put it. I asked him if he had ever landed on the Siberian coast.

"Sure, we landed now and again," he said, "but just long enough to get fresh water."

"Once, I remember," he went on as memory kindled, "seeing seven bears on a beach feeding off the carcass of a stranded whale. We landed for a bear hunt, and Charlie Burns and I got one. Not as big as Kodiak bear, but fairly big. We wot it off in a boat pretty quick. The Russians had a habit of sneaking up on you."



GEORGE CESSFORD
. . . one of a tough breed



ALEX McLEAN
. . . London's "Seawolf?"

GEORGE TOLD ME he quit sealing around 1905 and after that followed the carpenter's trade. As we talked, I heard something of his boyhood; of life at Belmont Farm, when his father worked in a tannery where now the tri-services college stands. In his stories I caught glimpses of a less complicated era; of oil lamps and well water, and family discipline. Of how once, because of a howling southeast gale, he was kept home from school, and later sneaked out to see what the storm looked like at sea. From a vantage point on a cliff he saw half a dozen square riggers riding out the fury of the gale in Royal Roads, and as he watched four of them, one after another, dragged anchor and went ashore. He remembered the names of two of the ill-fated ships: the Tiger and the Gettysburg.

Did I say he had a good memory?

I traced this very incident to Good Friday, April 13, 1883 (when George Cessford was 11) and the Southern Chief and Connaught were the other two ships that went ashore. Only the Duke of Argyle and the Tiber rode it out.

In his early 'teens George Cessford had his first brush with the terrors of the deep, in the schooner R. I. Morris when it turned turtle off the Oregon coast, then rolled herself upright again. During this unbelievable 360 degree gyration seven of the eight-man crew (Cessford included) were below. The eighth man, on deck, was swept away and never seen again.

On another occasion, returning in a schooner from a seal hunt off the Pribiloffs, they were 90 miles north of the Queen Charlottes when someone on deck spotted what he thought were spouting whales. But an Indian crewman up aloft yelled, "It's a ship!"

It was a ship all right, but dismasted, the breaking seas giving the spouting effect.

A dory put off to investigate, George in the bow; and nearing the derelict he noticed a man standing by the stern davits. The decks were awash, the masts overboard, yet the man stood staring at the sea. When the dory got closer the sealers yelled at the lone figure. When Cessford clambered aboard, he saw the reason. The man was dead. With one arm around the davit, he had one leg through the rail which somehow kept him propped up. Broken open at his feet was a box of dried apples and Cessford noticed his nose and chin were frostbitten. They lowered him into the dory and gave him a sea burial.

"What happened to the ship?" I asked.

"She was a small schooner, American, and we told a U.S. coastguard boat about her. They found her and towed her in to some Alaskan port. Below decks they found the skipper and his wife, two children and a missionary. All drowned."

I THOUGHT of the lonely burial at sea, and "Wolf" Larsen in Jack London's "Seawolf." Only part of the burial service Larsen could remember was ". . . and the body shall be cast in the sea." Which reminded me in turn that I was on the trail of the original Seawolf, Alex McLean.

George Cessford knew him and they often met at sea, or in Victoria or Hakodate, the little seaport on the Japanese island of Hokkaido which Victoria sealers were intermittently taking over or taking apart.

Conjecture has always been whether Jack London used Alex McLean as a pattern for his fictional "Wolf" Larsen. There were similarities, but apparently not in temperament.

Alex McLean, the Cape Breton Highlander, was husky and devil-may-care but never as vicious as "Wolf" Larsen was portrayed. True, he could bolt his whisky or belt an enemy with the best of them, but he was usually a quiet, well-spoken, well-behaved man, extraordinarily neat about his person and his ship.

According to Jack London, "Wolf" Larsen had a brother ("skipper of the sealing steamer Macedonia") whom Wolf disliked. McLean had a brother, Dan, whom he liked. Larsen in his sealing adventures in the mythical schooner Ghost met up with the schooner San Diego. Curiously enough Alex McLean once shipped out of San Francisco in a schooner called the San Diego. In his latter days, by the way, McLean wasn't too pleased at beging linked with Jack London's "Seawolf."

George Cessford described McLean as a stockily built man of medium height, distinguished always (like his brother Dan) for his king-sized moustache; it's said he could touch the ends of it behind his neck. Matching the moustache were equally heavy eyebrows, sheltering a pair of steel blue eyes. He had a temper, but he could hold it. Once, according to George Cessford, when he was with McLean in a Hakodate barroom, a general free-for-all developed and McLean challenged all comers to a trial of strength. One giant sealer took him up, and in the scrimmage tore out half of McLean's famous moustache.

"He was madder'n a bull," chuckled George, "but although he always carried a gun, he never drew it."

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